

# **RIDEM Wetlands Task Force Watershed Working Group Meeting**

**24 February 2000**

## **Final Meeting Notes**

### **Attendees:**

Peter Holmes, Tom Getz, Frank Golet, Eugenia Marks, Chris Mason, Carol Murphy, Sarah Porter

### **DISCUSSION**

The meeting began with each participant briefly presenting their interests regarding watershed issues related to wetland protection and regulation. The discussion then turned to Working Group goals and objectives (in general) and the issues identified by the Task Force during the first two meetings (Task Force issues shown in *bold italics* below):

#### ***Incorporate watershed concept into wetlands program.***

We started with an explanation of “the watershed approach”. Peter noted that it is an EPA initiative. Eugenia is involved with Rhode Island’s program as a representative of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. Carol is involved with RIDEM’s pilot programs for the Woonasquatucket and “South County” watersheds. The following list characterizes some features of the watershed approach:

- Holistic land use / environmental planning process/public participation through local projects related to water quality and related areas
- Integrated approach to water quality assessment
- Involves many levels of participation, including local river teams, local officials, businesses, advocacy groups, state and federal agencies
- Leadership from state Watershed Coordinating Council (= Executive Committee for Watershed Approach)
- Tied to Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process
- Two RIDEM pilot projects (Woonasquatucket River watershed, “South County” watersheds; demonstration/ pilot project)

A draft report entitled “Rhode Island Watershed Approach Framework” provides the following definition:

**“Watershed Approach:** A strategy that promotes the integration of both public and private stakeholder interests in working towards a common goal – to support the sustainable use of natural resources. The approach is based on the understanding that many environmental management issues are best addressed at the watershed level, and that management is greatly enhanced by the involvement and collaboration of a wide range of people living and working in the area.” (RI Watershed Approach Committee Writing Committee, Draft June 1999)

Carol noted that a newer draft of this document might be available.

The following questions and comments were raised during the ensuing discussion of the watershed approach:

- How should our Watershed Working Group deal with the watershed approach? It was noted that we should probably limit ourselves to looking at how the RIDEM wetlands permitting, enforcement and planning/policy groups should be integrated into the watershed approach. Tom suggested we group our recommendations into statutory, regulatory or administrative categories.

- There is a significant need for basic research data – e.g. species level effects of increased pollutant loading.
- The watershed approach might result in different standards for screening projects, depending on individual watershed characteristics.
- With regard to wetlands, the watershed approach may (should?) involve consideration of pollutant attenuation in artificial wetlands and natural wetlands. What is the natural assimilative capacity of wetlands for pollutants?
- How does the scale of the watershed affect the application of the watershed approach? Eugenia noted that a recent Bioscience article spoke to this issue, concluding that evaluation of watersheds at different scales was appropriate for different purposes (i.e. there is no one perfect scale for all types of evaluation, but that one scale may be more appropriate than another for a particular type of evaluation).
- Frank noted that a joint URI – RIDEM project involved development of a GIS database of wetlands in the Pawcatuck River watershed.

***Allow for local input on decisions concerning wetlands issues, especially who determines if a project is 'big' or 'small'.***

The following comments were made in reference to this issue:

- The determination of whether a project is “big” or “small” (significant or insignificant) should consider the context of the project within the watershed.
- When soliciting local input, RIDEM should consider stakeholders within the project watershed, not just the municipality.

***Allow flexibility that permits the elimination of definitional wetlands of no value.***

Comments on this issue:

- Are there any wetlands of no value? Suggested we change “no value” to “limited value”.
- Wetland value should be assigned, in part, in consideration of its watershed context (e.g. a wetland may appear small and of little value, but may actually be more significant because it represents a rare type or performs a rare function within the watershed).

***Regulations are value neutral and apply the same level of protection to all wetlands.***

Comments on this issue:

- The level of protection afforded to wetlands should consider their importance in the context of their watershed.

***Regulations need to assess cumulative alterations on a wetlands system.***

Comments on this issue:

- Cumulative impacts to small wetlands may result in significant wetland losses in a watershed (e.g. vernal pools are often small, and the loss of many small vernal pools might represent a significant loss of amphibian breeding sites within a watershed).
- The abundance of a wetland function in a watershed affects the importance of a given wetland with regard to its performance of that function.

- It is useful to consider how an individual wetland loss will affect the overall performance of a wetland function in a watershed.
- The importance of a given wetland function within a watershed affects the importance (significance) of individual wetlands which perform that function (e.g. in a watershed with public water supplies degraded by excessive nutrient loads, loss of wetlands which provide nutrient removal/transformation may be more significant than similar wetland losses in a watershed without water quality problems).
- New CRMC Special Area Management Plans for Narrow River and Salt Ponds include consideration of cumulative impacts.

***Regulation of adjacent upland areas should be discussed and these areas should be evaluated for small wetland impacts.***

Comments on this issue:

- Extending RIDEM wetland jurisdictional boundaries appears politically unlikely at this time, despite scientific data that support extended jurisdiction.
- There may be opportunities to provide improved wetland protection from impacts occurring outside the boundary of regulated areas through enforcement of performance standards at the boundary (e.g. suspended solids loading from construction site runoff might be effectively regulated through RIDEM's RIPDES stormwater permits for construction activity).
- Improved protection might be afforded through local initiatives (e.g. municipalities with more stringent ISDS regulations, Middletown's watershed protection regulations).

***The wetland mitigation policy should be considered.***

Comments on this issue:

- Does RIDEM have a wetland mitigation policy beyond that indirectly referenced in the existing regulations?
- If a compensatory mitigation policy were developed, it should consider compensation within the watershed.
- Massachusetts has a new procedure (plan/guideline/policy?) for ranking wetland functions in a watershed and identifying and ranking mitigation sites for their mitigation banking program.

## **HOMEWORK**

Watershed Working Group participants are requested to bring the following items to the next Working Group meeting:

1. A short list of goals for the Watershed Working Group
2. Information on watershed – wetland initiatives from other states/jurisdictions
3. A list of recommendations for the group to consider

## **NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will be held in the RIDEM Director's conference room (conference room A) at 10:30 AM on Wednesday, 15 March 2000.